

# **ENCODING AND DECODING PLANTATION SOCIETY: WISTFUL MEMORIES OF STUART HALL AND NORMAN GIRVAN.**

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**ABSTRACT.** Two giants of Caribbean thought have recently departed: Stuart Hall (1932 - 2014), cultural scholar, and Norman Girvan (1941 - 2014), economist. Hall held professorial posts at the University of Birmingham and the Open University in the UK, and retained close links with Jamaica. He studied ethnicity, issues of Caribbean diaspora, critical examinations of Marxism, media and communications, and the ideas of the New Left and post-modernism. Girvan, a professor at the University of the West Indies, was a strong critic of the dependence of the Caribbean and other post-colonial nations on economic and technological structures and thinking locked into a colonial paradigm. He also worked in regional and international bodies to achieve closer regional alignment in the Caribbean and strategies for regional economic transformation. This tribute explores the contributions of both scholars to the fields of cultural studies and political economy, and particularly celebrates their significance to the Caribbean and Latin American region.

As a 21<sup>st</sup> century, middle class Jamaican scholar, interfacing with the cultural/creative economy, I am faced with the answers provided and the ones left unanswered by Stuart Hall (1932 - 2014) and Norman Girvan (1941 - 2014). These giants of Caribbean thought, recently departed, have returned to their ancestors, perhaps with the notion that, that which they most feared for their people, Caribbean people, has been actualized.

Girvan's prompting that "the root cause of underdevelopment is the colonization of the mind, and the path to true development begins with the

liberation of the mind” resonates with the sentiment of Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley.

Girvan as economist and Hall as cultural scholar, represent, by virtue of their academic disciplines, thesis and antithesis in the creative/cultural economy dialectic. The two came to a shared angst from two separate disciplinary directions. Jamaican Pan Africanist and scholar, Rupert Lewis, identified the significance of their differences in orientation. Lewis shared anecdotally that he had first met Stuart Hall at a seminar organized by Norman Girvan in the 1990s when Norman was head of the interdisciplinary Consortium Graduate School, now called SALISES, at the University of the West Indies. At that conference, Stuart critiqued economics for neglecting culture.

Yet, their positions were much more aligned than they were divided. Philosophical and ideological commonalities superseded disciplinary polarity. Postcolonial relationships were central to both Hall and Girvan’s theses. Both cite Jamaican Economist, the late George Beckford and his analysis of ‘Plantation Society’ as central motif in the current circumstances of the Caribbean and its people. Perhaps both Girvan and Hall could be accorded the description Girvan designed for ‘GBeck’ himself: “Had [he] been born on a slave plantation, he would have either died in a rebellion or ended up with the maroons<sup>1</sup>, living off the land and blowing the Abeng<sup>2</sup>” (1999).

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<sup>1</sup> The Maroons were ex-slaves who escaped from slavery from as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and settled in the mountains of Jamaica. The Maroons are celebrated for their role in freeing the enslaved and doing battle with the enslavers through plantation raids and other such activities.

<sup>2</sup> An Abeng is the horn of an animal, most likely that of a bull, which is crafted to be blown the produce a variety of sounds. The Abeng was used on slave plantations to

Throughout their careers, the demons that seemed to torment both Hall and Girvan stemmed from their profound sense that “contemporary Jamaica was nothing more than the modern version of a colonial slave society, a society with which he [George Beckford] was in constant intellectual contestation and psychological rebellion” (Girvan, 1999, p.2). Hall in an interview talked about, “...plantation society repeating itself in the psyche of the poor and oppressed peoples of now post plantation society, continuing to be operative in pathological form” (Paul, 2005, p.35).

Their lives in mid-twentieth century Jamaica influenced and shaped the positions they would eventually take. Neither was born into families weighed down by the material aftermath of slavery. Both Stuart Hall and Norman Girvan were born into middle class Jamaican families about a century after Emancipation. It was a critical period of transition for the colonial nation, characterized by pivotal labour unrest and political struggle as Jamaica prepared for and negotiated independence from Britain.

Both men received a classical education from Church-led elite high schools in Kingston, Hall at Jamaica College and Girvan at Calabar. In Jamaica, the high school that Hall attended was a significant indicator of high social placement and status. Social distinctions were further made by the shade of one’s skin, leading to Hall describing the colonial Jamaica of his youth as a ‘pigmentocracy’ (*Telegraph*, 2014). Girvan’s High School had been established to

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transmit information through a code of signals over vast distances without ‘the enemy’ being able to respond.

educate black, working class boys and those from an emerging middle class.

The differences in the early conditioning of the two Jamaican scholars represent the contradictions and conflict that existed in colonial Jamaica at the time of their birth, between the 1930's and 40s. Herman Hall, Stuart's father, was a Chief Accountant with United Fruit Jamaica<sup>3</sup>, the first non-white to hold a senior position. The younger Hall remembered the restrictions placed on him by his mother, that prevented him from bringing home school friends who were of black complexion, and the chronic emotional distress suffered by his sister whose incipient romance with a black medical student was terminated by parental decree.

Alternatively, Girvan grew up amidst the progressive fervor of the pre-independence nationalist project of 'building a new Jamaica'. His father Tom was a foundational member of the Norman Manley-led team that established the community development movement that eventually became Jamaica Welfare Limited. Norman Manley, Jamaica's Premier, who was the chief architect of the independence movement, had assembled a team of progressive thinkers, including Girvan's father, to interface with Jamaica's black masses. Girvan said of his father's egalitarianism, "I think much of his passion must have rubbed off on me" (Girvan, 2007).

From the vantage point of hindsight, there is irony-of-circumstance that, in an effort to reduce the rural-urban drift, in his re engineering efforts, Norman Manley got the United Fruit Company,

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<sup>3</sup> The United Fruit Company was an American corporation that traded tropical fruit, mostly bananas from the West Indies, and South America in the United States of America and Europe. It has been associated with exploitative and repressive trade regimes.

where Hall's conservative father was accountant, to give a penny for every bunch of bananas bought, towards rural development. The fund was to be administered by the institution in which Girvan's progressive father had done foundational work, Jamaica Welfare, to promote service cooperatives, set up a literacy programme, started self-help housing and began a process of building national pride and cultural identity.

Thoughts that began in the minds of two scholars born on different philosophical sides of the Jamaican 'plantation', led them to different places for tertiary scholarship. A Rhodes Scholarship took Hall to Oxford University in England "soon after the first wave of Windrush<sup>4</sup> migrants from the Caribbean. He was thus able to witness the reaction of the motherland to its colonial subjects turning up on her doorstep, and the prejudice he encountered inspired him to become involved in politics" (*Telegraph*, 2014).

Hall studied English at Oxford, and took a keen interest in media. The synthesis of politics and media took on great significance in his work. He took the position that messages and the media through which they were transmitted, have a "complex structure of dominance" caused by institutional power relations (Hall, 1993: 508). This thesis became central to the evolution of his foundational interest in media and his articulation of media as an organ of representation.

Hall's work in media evolved into the advancement of a cultural studies agenda, with its "multiple discourses", varied histories, formations,

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<sup>4</sup> The Empire Windrush was the name of the ship that brought the first postwar wave of 492 West Indian migrants to Britain in 1948

“different conjectures and moments...different kinds of work” (Hall, 1996, 263). For Hall, this work included ethnicity, issues of Caribbean diaspora, critical examinations of Marxism, the ideas of the New Left and post-modernism; all centred around his insistence that cultural studies have a practical impact on reality (Sardar and Van Loon, 2004, 38).

Hall, deemed to be among the ‘fathers of cultural studies’, mused, “After all, didn’t cultural studies emerge somewhere at the moment when I first met Raymond Williams, or in the glance I exchanged with Richard Hoggart? In that moment cultural studies was born; it emerged full grown from the head” (1996, 263). Hall became director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.

A scholarship also brought Norman Girvan to the University College of the West Indies<sup>5</sup> at Mona, Jamaica, in 1959, to study Economics. He lists as his significant intellectual influences the outstanding Caribbean scholars Roy Augier, M.G. Smith, Lloyd Best and Alister McIntyre. “Fellow students Orlando Patterson and Walter Rodney were among my closest friends” (Girvan, 2007).

His experience at Mona planted a seed of regionalism for which Girvan became legendary. He said, “I entered Mona as a Jamaican nationalist and left as a Caribbean regionalist. I have never recognised a contradiction between the two; the one melds into the other seamlessly; and I believe that

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<sup>5</sup> The University College of the West Indies was founded in 1948 as part of a special relationship with the University of London. Located at Mona, in Kingston, Jamaica, it established two more campuses, in the 1960s, in Trinidad and Barbados. It achieved independent University status and was renamed the University of the West Indies in 1962. Today it serves 18 countries and territories in the Caribbean.

anyone who thinks otherwise either does not know our history, or chooses to deny it” (Girvan, 2007).

A second scholarship took Girvan to the London School of Economics where he honed his ideas on the contribution of foreign capital to economic development in the Caribbean in the post-war period and his concepts of ‘industrialisation by invitation’ that prevailed within the policies of the time. Girvan’s focus of the time was on the bauxite industry although his research caused him to conclude generally that growth industrial trends brought was not self-sustaining because the required structural changes in the economy had not taken place (Girvan, 2007). Ironies prevail in Jamaica of the present day as ‘industrialization by invitation’, where foreign-owned institutions in the economy, and patterns of public expenditure financed by foreign loans, have evolved as the basis for contemporary economic policy.

The perspectives of the Jamaican colonials evolved into Left-leaning, anti-imperialist positions that undergirded the scholarship and lives of both the Cultural Scholar and the Economist. These further burgeoned into broad postcolonial worldviews and theories. Hall’s bigger picture presented cultural identities as not fixed, but fluid – “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power (*Telegraph*, 2014).

Girvan’s intellectual exploits saw him become a professor of development studies and director of the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies at the University of the West Indies, and head of the National Planning Agency of the Government of Jamaica. He worked within the Jamaican and Guyanese Central Governments as an

advisor on bauxite and mining, and then in Latin America, Africa and the United Nations. He published extensively on the political economy of development in the Caribbean and the Global South and his work was celebrated by several honours and awards. From his own account, in 1969/1970 he spent time in Latin America (mostly Chile), on a Ford Foundation/ISER Fellowship to study the mineral industries, Chilean copper specifically. He formed a strong interest in Latin American *dependencia* thinking and compared it with his thinking on Caribbean dependency and regional industrialisation strategies for regional economic transformation. The similarities of development challenges between the adjoining regions fascinated the Economist. “Contact with Latin America heightened my awareness the region’s rich intellectual tradition and more sensitive to the cultural prejudices that cause the Anglo-Saxon world either to ignore it or to belittle its importance”, he wrote in his autobiographical musings (Girvan, 2007).

I share the interest in politics of both scholars. I connect with what they represent. The very first academic conference I attended was in tribute to Stuart Hall. My academic supervisor sat, academically, at Norman Girvan’s feet. Having been told, through her, that I had crafted and contributed to a speech he had heard delivered in Cuba in 2012, Girvan reminded me that I had a voice of my own and should use it. I am grateful that he took the time to listen and to send the message. I identify directly with Girvan’s political trajectory given my unique placement within the government of Jamaica. I also share Hall’s background in literature

and media – in particular television, having been a television producer and scriptwriter prior to carrying out a comparative study of the television industries of Jamaica and Ghana (Hickling 2010) and seeing through Hall’s lens the manifestation of the relationships between power, politics and media content. Hall’s work has assisted me to me to “encode and decode” (Hall, 1996, p. 507) signifiers within postcolonial Jamaica, using Hall’s notions of the importance of identifying signifiers and determining what they represent in the contexts of power, politics and specific cultures.

I embrace the nuances of Girvan’s political economy, given my own involvement with the emerging area of cultural/creative economy. Girvan’s notions on dependency resonate with me as I explore the need to develop a Caribbean Creative Economy in the twenty first century in the same way that the region needed to focus on the mining in the mid twentieth century. Yet, I accept and share his argument that given the necessity to forge relationships with multi-lateral and multinational entities in this the era of globalized trade, that developing nations must engage in notions of “rethinking development”.

In his paper “Rethinking Development: Out Loud”, Girvan’s existential criticism of dependence points to its failure and posits, as an alternative, “sustained development” and “Human Scale Development”. He examined dependency theory, which argued that many Third World problems have occurred because developing nations like those in the Caribbean, still remain dependent on colonial structures. The alternative debated was that these new nation-states develop their own brand of

culturally specific thinking. It can be said that Girvan comes down on the side of seeing dependency theory as one of the early strands of thinking that resisted the colonial aftermath. Even in twenty-first century contexts the significance and weight of these arguments is clear in contemporary development discourse.

In negotiating cultural and creative economy discourse in the developing nations of the Caribbean and beyond, the dependency economy thesis of Girvan meets Hall's ideas concerning cultural representation, media, power and politics found in the contemporary cultural/creative economy discourse. This articulates notions of legitimizing culture as economic activity within developing nations with their cultural idiosyncrasies and specificities. The comparison is further complicated by the two conventional approaches to cultural and creative economy discourse, each of which is represented by the disciplines of Hall and Girvan.

Traditionally, political economy and cultural studies readings of media and cultural industries come from divergent perspectives. The political economy approach to global media takes an empirical, evidence-based approach to the study. It examines revenues earned in media markets, changing systems of media production, trends in media policy and changing systems of media production. Hesmondhalgh (2007, p.33) notes that the political economy approach is concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention. Additionally, political economy approaches engage with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good.

Conversely, cultural studies as a discipline

places academic value on changing emotions and intangibles associated with the histories and industry-cultures of the cultural/creative industries being examined. Cultural studies attempts to examine and rethink culture by considering the relationship of cultural industries to social power and takes a radical line of political action, through its critical examination of the cultural industries concept. The study questions hierarchical ways of understanding culture and argues that “ordinary everyday culture needs to be taken seriously” (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p. 41) in the considerations of planning and policy development for cultural industries. In keeping with a cultural studies approach, the study does not present value-free scholarship; it is committed to “moral evaluations of modern societies” (Sardar and Van Loon, 2004, p. 9).

My approach converges the two using a cultural-studies-meets-political-economy lens. I approach political economy from a cultural studies perspective, using Golding and Murdock’s argument that critical political economy approaches to media and cultural industries are holistic (Hesmondhalgh, 2007, p.33). For me, political, social and cultural life are interrelated even as they are historical and pay close attention to long-term changes in social power, the role of state, corporations and media in culture.

The deaths of Stuart Hall and Norman Girvan have transported history into the present in ways that give special credence to their lives, work and thought. Their stories provide the Caribbean, struggling with the dialectic of thinking and doing, with ‘maps of social reality’ and ‘maps of meaning’ (Hall, 96). Arguably, these are being encoded or

decoded less and less, in a quest to provide insight and answers to long-asked questions that still have currency and relevance in postcolonial societies of the present day.

Both Hall and Girvan cross-referenced the signifier of the Caribbean post-colonial with the contradictions of the political, ideological and economic divide of Left and Right that characterized the 1970's through 90's, the crescendo periods of their scholarship. That is to say, their scholarship analysed the juxtaposition of cold war thinking with Caribbean postcolonial contexts. These discomforts remain unresolved and continue to haunt the Caribbean development process. The silence brought by liberalization has left many of their questions unanswered and comments unheeded. Girvan himself asks, of his exploration of development "so where does this all leave us?" answering his own question, "frankly, I am not too sure myself: if you find that there have been more questions than answers in what I have said, then you are right" (Girvan, 1991, p. 12).

I ask, of the revolutions of their time, what will have come of them? As Stuart Hall himself reflected, "failed revolutions are often the most successful in the long run: Remember 1968, when everyone said that nothing changed, that nobody won state power. It's true. The students didn't win. But since then life has been profoundly transformed. Ideas of communitarianism, ideas of the collective, of feminism, of being gay, were all transformed by the impact of a revolution that did not succeed... So I don't believe in judging the historical significance of events in terms of our usually faulty judgment of where they may end up." (*Telegraph*, 2014)

In May 2013 I attended celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the African Union in Ethiopia. The significance of that celebration was seen in retrospective reviews of the global liberation revolutions of a half-century ago, and their impact on Africa. At the festive celebration in Addis Abbaba's Millennium Hall, Kenneth David Kaunda, Zambia's first President, took to the podium. He seemed a fragile, diminishing man, shrinking with the passage of time, affected by the ravages of age. The shrunken giant spoke of his friends, his heroes. He seemed to wish to tell us, to remind us, that the leaders of 50 years ago, who "sacrificed blood and life for the freedom of their peoples", were mere mortals who took decisions to make changes. These were leaders "of extraordinary conviction and inner decisiveness... who mobilized their people to rise up against injustice, racism and racial discrimination", he said, providing resonance that is frightening, saddening – emotionally stirring, words that hit forcibly home. Yet, "Sadly these heroes are no more", he lamented.

Almost wistfully, Kaunda recalled, "To some they were terrorists and troublemakers but to the oppressed majority they were heroes, liberators and great leaders".

With the romanticism of hindsight, Kaunda's description of the founding fathers resound like a eulogy for Hall and Girvan. In the midst of their struggle, these giants of revolutions past, the founding fathers and mothers of politics, economy, ideology and intellectual thought, fought to ask relevant questions and to seek the answers. At the conference in Ethiopia, historical video footage that accompanied Kaunda's retrospective presentation

was projected on video screens. The filmic representation brought the struggles to life, for a generation for whom these remain stories of an era past. The historical, black and white frames showed clenched fists, coup-torn homes, victory, liberation, death, darkness and fear; they represented notions of the ideological fervor of Hall and Girvan's times. The works of Hall and Girvan are like frames of those films. Within them lie unanswered questions, questions that remain relevant even amidst contemporary global neo-liberalism.

The world has changed significantly in 50 years. The challenges faced in the here-and-now are very different to the there-and-then. Contexts of leadership are obsessed with 'liberalization' over liberation. Progressive and conservative seem to have merged in practice.

Global realities call for the analysis of Hall and Girvan, analysis of the type that critically assesses the principles of the dialectic of left and right, in order to come up with the synthesis of natural selection. Perhaps the difficulty is that it is emerging without the benefit of the analysis.

The struggle and the search for answers continue even as the searching queries of times past seem to have evaporated with the expedience of the structurally adjusted times. Perhaps there is still hope for postcolonial peoples whose spirits of a revolution of one kind or another lay low on the ground like wispy strands of mist, whispering softly. One day they shall again, speak up.

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